THE N. J. SARGENT COLLECTION OF JAPANESE PRINTS

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Department of Fine and Applied Arts
EVERETT C. MAXWELL, Curator
ELIZABETH DEUEL, Assistant

The Art of Japanese Printing

By EVERETT CARROLL MAXWELL.

In the present day of materialism, when all forms of endeavor turn upon the labor-saving, time-saving, and money-saving axis, there is small place for the delightful art of wood-engraving which ceased to be popular with the close of the eighteenth century. Print collectors now number the best examples of this by-gone art in their portfolios and never weary of seeking out a new discovery in old book-shops, musty rookeries and basement junk stores. Many of these private collections are of rare value and contain representative examples of the wood-engraver's best work. For the person of artistic tastes, having limited means, there is no collection in which he can so wisely and profitably invest his spare money and derive greater satisfaction and pleasure therefrom than that of old prints.

Personally I prefer wood-block prints to steel engravings, and I contend that a well-selected, well-framed print of first-class degree is far superior to any second-rate piece of sculpture, painting, or object of art for house adornment. The average person cannot afford to place upon his walls the works of our present-day painters, or sculptors, and if he buy such work it must come from the studio of a second-rate artist, or, worse still, from the commercial art shop where bargain counter wares are always on display to entrap the unsuspecting. One of the most tasteful and charming homes in New York has upon its walls no other

decoration than well-chosen prints and a few etchings. There is a wide and varied range of this graphic art, and one may take his choice in starting a portfolio.

The old French print is delightful in color, delicate in line, and unusually decorative in design. The Germans have given us many rich and beautiful subjects and the old English print has long been a favorite with connoisseurs. However, were I choosing the art of any one nation whose artists have given thought to wood-block printing, I should certainly turn my attention to the land of cherry blossoms and fairy tales and study to comprehend the truly marvelous creations of the masters of old Japan whose originality and dexterity in the graphic arts have never been even partially attained by any other nation on the face of the globe, and I believe I shall be supported in the statement that they will never find a rival while time lasts.

In the Japanese block print we find the consummation of all the charms of similar efforts in other countries. The early English print is usually crude in color, uncertain in outline, and often coarse in conception. The French print as a rule is pleasing to the eye by virtue of its rather prettyfied design and delicate color, but too often is lacking in character and insipid in its purpose. None of these faults can be laid at the door of the masters of old Japan. From the birth of the school, back in the eighth century, to its golden age, which, according to the best authorities, appears to have been from 1750 to 1830, these quaint prints have always possessed a quality of direct purpose and poetic expression which places them far ahead of any printer's art before or since.

The earliest examples extant are printed in black and white, religious texts being the subjects. These prints are bold in outline, vigorous in design, and notably graceful in composition. In the early seventeenth century picture books were introduced which did much to popularize this art among the Japanese. Play bills and theatrical favorites were chosen subjects with the early engravers. The first book illustrations to be colored were made between the middle of the eighteenth century. Then it was that surimonos became the vogue. These were a sort of signed

proof which the artist gave about as we give a business or visiting card. Okyo was the first artist to overturn conventional law and copy nature. His work inspired many followers. The list of good print makers of old Japan is lengthy. Certain artists became famous for their illustrations for fairy tales and novels, others for their decorative designs for theatrical posters, pictures of fair women, national heroes, or local scenery. Okyo, who founded the great school, was famous for his fishes and fowls, Sosen for monkeys, and Korin for his rabbits. Okasai was valued for bird drawing and Hiroshige for his marvelous landscape renderings. The great fiure artists were Horunobu, Utamaro, Sukenobu, Kiyonago, Toyoharu, Okamura-Masanobu, and Koriusai.

Contradicting popular opinion of his own countrymen, Hokusai was the greatest of all Japanese artists. His most valued work is his "One Hundred Views of Fuji," a set of which may be seen in the Boston Public Library. Hokusai died at the age of ninety, exclaiming with his last breath, "If heaven had granted me five years more, I might have become a great artist." He sleeps under the cherry and pine trees of Yedo, and on his grave is chiseled an epitaph which reads, "This is the tomb of the old man mad about painting." To the eyes of the layman unfamiliar with the delicate and illusive art of the old master of Japan, these prints no doubt suggest the primitive, but when a true appreciation has been reached, one is bound to be impressed by their perfection of taste and refinement, which has been attained only after long centuries of culture. Their value in the teaching of color harmony, balance, composition, and simplicity of design in art academies or in public schools is great, and we know how much Whistler and others of his craft have been influenced in art by these ancient workmen.

Japanese prints are like fairy tales, they leave much for the imagination. I have often been asked by persons seeking knowledge on the print subject, "What is the secret of the art?" And I always reply, "The absolute elimination of all non-essentials." I believe this is really the key to their great merit, for it is obviously true in studying the print that this principle of elimination of useless details,

which makes for strength in any art, has found here its most complete development. These old masters have dared to do what none others ever thought of doing, to disregard absolutely the deluding arts of perspective and light and shade, leaving only form and color and the suggestion of motion. They rendered form and color without aiming at relief. Our European artists seek relief and ocular delusion while all Japanese art is in the flat, hence, in a sense it is all a decoration. The print ornaments and suggests rather than depicts, and it is never developed too far in any one part to the injury of the spirit of the whole.

I remember asking a young Vassar girl, whom I chanced to meet while attending a private exhibition of prints what impressed her most in the study of their art. "Their simplicity," she replied quickly. She was an apt student, for their simplicity is truly beyond our understanding, the simplicity of the sort that it takes a master to achieve.

Quoting from a noted writer on the subject of Japanese prints, I define color prints as the "meeting of two wonderfully sympathetic surfaces, the unsandpapered grain of the cherry wood block and a mesh in the paper of pulsating vegetable tentacles. On the one color may be laid almost dry and may be transferred to the other by a delicacy of personal touch that leaves only a trace of tint balancing on the tips of the fibres and from the interstices of these printed tips the whole luminous heart of the paper wells up, diluting the pigment with soft golden sunshine." That sounds very much like poetry, does it not? However, it is just a plain statement of facts. The paper used in making the old prints was in itself a work of art. It was truly alive, hence the prints retain their luminous quality to this very day.

You cannot judge these old artists or their work by a down-to-date European standard. The further away you get from modern ideas, the more in harmony you will become with the old masterpieces of Japan. The decadence of the old school and final death blow to the print art of Japan was the direct result of European influence entering into the flowery kingdom. The modern print is not only an affront to good art and good taste, but it is a disgrace to the Japanese empire. I have often been asked if the scenery

and people seen in prints really look so in real life. Absurd! The print masters did not even attempt to copy nature. Here they were quite right, for they have arrived at a truth higher than historical truth. Their art is always a convention, even to the figure work. Each artist painted his beautiful women according to his own ideas and taste. In studying or selecting prints for a portfolio, judge them only for their pure beauty. Study the truth of their harmony, the quality of tone, and try to comprehend something of their marvelous technique. Also observe the texture of the paper used. Good paper is a thing of the past.

In the making of the print several artists are required. One draws, one cuts, one prints. Of course, the important man is the one who draws the sketch. Study the flow of lines in the work of the great artists. They are full of nervous vitality. For many years all prints were in black and white. It required a slow evolution getting up to seven colors. The whole idea of the Japanese print is of decoration. Is it not a wonder that the prints having fine and intricate lines never appear the least bit wooden when you stop to consider that they were all cut on wood by hand? When an old block wears out, a reprint is made by laying a fine old print on a cherry block and cutting out a new one. The printing is an important factor in printmaking, for a poor printer might spoil the most sublime Hokusai. The artistic merit of the printer truly does affect the print in many ways. The fine old paper, good colors, and master engravers are all past and gone, and the print is also fast passing away. Personally, I always recognize a fourth artist in the final artistic result of a print, and that one is the sun, for it surely has a great mission to perform in blending, softening and setting the color.

The first colors to be used in print making were rose and green. The decorative use of black in prints first appeared in theatrical posters, and was thus introduced to attract attention. It is a known fact that the famous gown builders of Paris study the color and design of these old prints and use many of the schemes in their creations. Flowers and birds were a late development, hence fewer good subjects.

In making Japanese prints the drawings are all painted

by hand on wooden blocks and then pressed off on to paper. Cherry wood is usually demanded, as it is fine grained and very hard. The blocks are planed and polished on both sides, as both sides are used. First the outline of the design is drawn on very thin paper, so thin that the lines will show through plainly on the back. The paper is then pasted face downward, so that when printed the work will not be reversed. The engraver now cuts all around the lines, leaving them standing in relief. Only one style of knife is used for all kinds of work. It has a narrow, short blade, about an inch long, cut off obliquely across the end. The oblique edge is the cutting edge. Fine chisels are also used. The blocks are oiled after the outlines are cut, and when dry a number of impressions are made on very thin paper. These are colored by the artist as he wishes them to be and are then pasted on blocks as before, and more blocks are cut from them, one for every color used in the printing. In printing the paper is dampened; the paints used are watercolors. Great skill is necessary to keep the colors from running and blurring. After all the impressions desired are made from the first block, the printer uses the second block, painting it before each impression with the desired color. This is repeated for each color used. Some prints receive as many as one hundred impressions a day. Ten thousand prints may be made from one set of blocks, only the first three hundred of which are considered number one prints. A palette of five colors is used, viz., red, blue, yellow, black and white.

Not long ago I was asked by one seeking light upon a dark subject, "What is one to do with a collection of Japanese prints after it has been secured?" There are several answers to such a question, but, first of all, let me throw out a kindly warning to all would-be print collectors. Keep your collections very small and very choice. I consider twenty-five well selected prints a goodly number. Out of these one may select two or three for framing; the remaining group can then be mounted on rough gray paper in book form or laid in a portfolio.

In all probability, print collecting will never become a popular fad, for the simple reason that it requires a highly developed sense of art to appreciate the truth and beauty

of these old drawings. It goes without saying that such collections will never be overdone in this day and age, for the fine old prints are extremely difficult to procure, and when found demand a high price. The best print collections are owned by the French government and are jealously guarded lest they prove too great a temptation to the commercial propensities of the art dealers who await with open arms the American collector and connoisseur.

Beware the modern Japanese print. It is without grace of line or beauty of color. The coloring employed by the modern print maker is nothing more or less than analine dye of the cheapest variety. The paper used nowadays is likewise an insult to the memory of the art which in its golden age gained for the artists of Japan the title of "the master printers of the world."

CATALOGUE

HARUNOBU, SUZUKI (1704-1770)
1 Girl Writing

SHUNSHO (1726-1790)
2 Two Girls and Men
3 Hashikakushi. Battle Scene
4 Hashikakushi. Man and Woman
5 Girl on River Bank
6 Genji Mono-gatari
7 Genji Mono-gatari
8 Genji Mono-gatari
9 Genji Mono-gatari
10 Genji Mono-gatari
11 Genji Mono-gatari
12 Genji Mono-gatari
13 Genji Mono-gatari
14 Genji Mono-gatari
15 Genji Mono-gatari

TOYOMARU (1740—)
16 Actor

SHUNKO, KATASUKAWA (1740-1827)
17 Actor
18 Two on Bench Playing Flute

CHOKI (1750)
19 ——

UTAMARO (1754-1806)
20 Flower Study
21 Yebisu Juggling
22 The Bride and Maids
23 Girl Tying Obi
24 Head
25 Two Figures
26 Oiran and Attendants
27-29 Three Seasons

HOKUSAI (1760-1849)

30 Fuji-sanjin-rokkei series. Tamagawa
31 Fuji-sanjin-rokkei series. Fuji and Village
32 Fuji-sanjin-rokkei series. Schichigahama
33 Fuji-sanjin-rokkei series. Pine Tree
34 Fuji-sanjin-rokkei series. Tuysikawa, Honen-Bashi
35 Surimono, Daimyo and Attendants
36 Surimono, Shoki
37 Tokaido series, Fuji
38 Tokaido series, Fuji
39 Surimono, Goshoguruma

KORYUSAI (1760—)

40 Girls Looking at Peacock in Cage
41 Hashirakakushi. Three Figures

SHUNKYOSAI (1760—)

42 View of Fuji

YEISHI (1761-1800)

43 Sumiye. Condiment Peddler and Girls

SHUNYEI (1762-1819)

44 The Monkey Show
45 Theatre Poster
46 Theatre Poster
47 Female Figure
48 Chushungura

TOYOKUNI (1769-1825)

49 Actor. Iwai Hanshiro
50 Triptych. Shichifukujin
51 Actor. Ichikawa Danjuro
52-62 Chiushingura
63 Shiba
64 Girl Carrying Buckets
65 Two Actors
66 Hashirakakushi. Girl on Bridge
67 Iwai Hanshiro
68-70 Setsugekkwa
71 Girl in Pink
72 Ichikawa Danjuro as Mendicant Priest

73 Girl Reading Letter
74 Girl on Boat
75 Set of Six Rokkasen (The six poets)
76 Two Court Figures

TOYOHIRO (1773-1828)

77 Viewing the Cherry Blossoms

RYUKOKU SHUNKYOSAI (1775—)

78 Hashikakushi
79 Yaoya Oshichi with Falcon

YEIZAN KIKUGAWA (1775-1829)

80 Lady with Black Obi
81 Lady with Samisen
82 Lady with Wistaria
83 Female Figure
84 Lady Combing Her Hair
85 Hashirakakushi. Two figures
86 Girl Reading Letter
87 Girl in Red
88 Girl with Doll
89 Hashirakakushi. Female figure
90 Two Female Figures
91 Hashirikakushi. Two figures (3 prints)
92 Girl and Koto
93 Kakemonoye. Oran with bamboo design dress
94 Oiran with Purple Obi
95 Kakemonoye. Shoki
96 Kakemonoye. Girl
97 Girl Standing
98 Kakemonoye. Eagle
99 Kakemonoye. Two female figures
100 ——

KIKUMARO (1775—)

101 Yaoya Oshichi
102 Hashirakakushi. Two figures

YEISHO (1775—)

103 Hashirakakushi. Oiran and Attendant
104 Three Women and Man
105 School

SUKENOBU (1775—)

106 Hashirakakushi. Two figures

BANKI (1775—)

107 Hashirakakushi. Man, Girl and Maiko

HOTTA (1775—)

108 On the Banks of the Tamagawa

NAGAHIDE (1785—)

109 Two Female Heads

KUNISADA UTAGAWA (1785-1864)

110 ——
111 Kakemonoye. Court Lady
112 Autumn Festival Dance
113 Actor. Nakamura Uta-sae-mon
114 Triptych. A Shower on the River
115 Iwai Hanshiro
116 Gensuke Kunijiro
117 Kakemonoye. Girl in Blue
118 Triptych. Boating
119 Nakamura Ookichi
120 Girl by Hibachi
121 Girl Standing by Bridge (Done at the age of 76, 1863)
122 Girl Looking in Mirror
123 Girl Carrying Water Buckets
124 Girl with Umbrella in Snow
125 Girl with Umbrella in Snow
126 Falling of Cherry Petals

YEISEN, KEISAI (1789-1828)

127 Moon, Plum Tree and Nightingale. Surimono
128 Famous Beauty of the Tamagawa
129 Nihonbashi Gyoretsu
130 Mother and Child
131 The Worship of the Oiran. Signed Keisai
132 Girl and Samisen Bearer
133 Girl Weaving
134 Girl and Koto
135 Nihonbashi

136 Kakemonoye. Girl with Umbrella in Snow
137 Kumagaya
138 Asamayama
139 Senryugawa Watashi
140 Girl in Black
141 Girl with Samisen Box
142 Oiran Yasu-no-Hirabe
143 Oiran in Pink and Black
144 Girl and Koto
145 Girl Playing Koto
146 Panel. Boats and Fuji

KUNIYOSHI, UTAGAWA (1790-1861)

147 Lady Reading
148 Long panel. Landscape
149 Court Dance
150 Woman with Love Letter
151 Portrait of Actor. Dated 1833
152 Girl in Green
153 "Study in Pink"
154 Maiden Placing Poem in Tree
155 Nichiren Praying for the Safety of the Boat

SHUNSEN (1790—)

156 Two Ladies
157 Kakemonoye. Oiran
158 Coy Maiden

HIDEMARO (1790—)

159 Two Young Ladies and Servant
160 Two Girls

HOKUJIU (1790—)

161-4 Chiushingura
165-6 Landscape
167 Ocha-no-mizu

SEKIJO (1795—)

168 Hashirakakushi. Man and Woman

KATUSHIGE (1795—)

169 Hashirakakushi. Two Girls on Yengawa

HIROSHIGE (1796-1858)

170 Cherries at Kinryuzan
171 Tokaido series. Hara
172 Fuji Sanjiurokkei-no-Uchi
173 Soga Monogatari
174 Snow Scene, Kameido, Yedo
175 Tokaido series. Yoshiwara
176 Tokaido series. Kanagawa
177 Tokaido series. Hodogaya
178 Torii at Nagata
179 Fuji San-jiu-rokkei-no-Uchi
180 Tokaido series. Odawara
181 Tokaido series. Arai
182 Tokaido series. Shirasuka
183 Kisokaido series
184 Yedo Meisho, Yotsutani
185 Yedo Meisho, Temple
186 Toto Meisho
187 Cherries in Bloom, Yoshiwara
188 Bird Study
189 Bird Study
190 Yedo Meisho
191 Triptych. Soga Monogatari
192 Triptych of the Hachi Man Gu of Tomigaoka at Fukagawa, Tokio
193 Yedo Meisho. Winter, Kameido
194 Kakemonoye. Lions on Rock
195 Kinkakuji. Kyoto
196 Tokaido series. Fujisawa
197 Shokoku Meisho Hyakkei-no-Uchi
198 Tokaido series. Okazaki
199-200 Fuji Sanjiu-rokkei-no-Uchi
201 Mendicant Priests
201-204 Bird and Flower Studies
205-207 Panels. Toto Meisho
208 Asakusa. Kinryuzan
209 Shiba
210-223 Rokujiu-yo-shi-no-Uchi
224-227 Book-prints
228-31 Tokaido series
232 Girl Reading Letter

233 Oiran
234 Tokaido series. Kakegawa
235 Tokaido series. Fujikana Snow Scene
236 Temple
237 Tokaido series. Ookitsu
238 Tokaido series. Hamamatsu
239 Yedo. Meguro Odaizaka
240 Fish Study
241 Fish Study
242 Yedo. Shinagawa. Clam Digging
243 Clam Diggers
244 Nihonbashi. Setchu-no-kei
245 Tokaido series. Shimada
246 Temple Steps
247 Uyeno, Rokujin-yo-shu series
248 Kinryuzan
249 Sunset
250 Yui Upright

KIYOMITSU TORII (1780-1840)

251 Actor

HYAKUSAI (1800—)

252 Hashirakakushi. Man and Woman

YURAKU (1800—)

253 Hashirakakushi. Strong Boy and His Mother

OHO (1800—)

254 Surimono. Koto and Screen

..... (1800)

255 Landscape

SHINSAI (1800-1810)

256 Tea Ceremony, Surimono

BUNSEI (1800—)

257 Landscape

KUNIYASU (1800-1830)

258 Girl Watching Flight of Wild Geese
259 Benkei

..... 1800—)

260-261 Suhimono

KUNIKAGE (1810—)

262 Oiran Holding Letter

YOSHIMORI (1810—)

263 Oiran in Blue

UTAYAMA (1815—)

264 Female Figure

KUNINAO (1820—)

265 Actors (dated 1812)

266 Snowstorm

YOSHITORA (1820—)

267 View of the Eight Bridges, Yedo

268 Snow Scene

269 ——

KUNIMITSU (1820—)

270 Actor

KUNIMARU (1820—)

271 Girl with Letter Watching Geese Fly by Moon

TOYOSHIGE (1825—)

272 Girl by Tansu

KUNICHIKA (about 1825)

273 Oiran

HASEGAWA, SADANOBU (about 1830)

274 Shoki and Demon

SADATORA (1830—)

275 Girl Playing Go-ban

YOSHIKAZU (1830—)

276 Kakemonoye. Girl in Red

277 Girl with Fan

SHIGENOBU (1830—)

278 Yedo Meisho. Clam Digging at Shinagawa
279 Yedo Meisho. Under the Bridge

KUNIMORI (1830—)

280 Oigawa Watashi

KUNIHIRO (1830—)

281 Woman and Elephant

YOSHITSUNA (1840—)

282 Oiran

SHOKO (1840—)

283 Actor

SADAHIDE (1850—)

284 Kintaikyo

YOSHIIKU, UTAGAWA (about 1850)

285 Triptych. Zen-aku Kokoro-no Annai

SHUCHO, GYOKUSEN

286 The Dream

HIROSHIGE and KUNISADA

287 The Ferry. Winter

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288 Hanging picture, Kakemono. Plum and Bamboo
289 Hanging picture, Kakemono. Bamboo
290 Hanging picture, Kakemono. Plum Branch
291 Hanging picture, Kakemono. Girl in Red
292 Hanging picture, Kakemono. Cock and Peonies
293 Hanging picture, Kakemono. Plum
294 Hanging picture, Kakemono. Pieh Hsieh—Charm Scroll